

An Analysis of the Artistic Characteristics of Northeast Folk Songs --takes "Watching the Yangko Dance" as an example

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Abstract. "Watching the Yangko Dance" is a popular, influential and representative northeast folk song, not only lyrics and composition, singing and singing, but also into many northeast Yangko tunes. Taking the northeast folk song " Watching the Yangko Dance" as an example, this paper comprehensively analyzes the artistic characteristics of the northeast folk songs contained behind the works by analyzing the cultural background, the structure of the works, the melody and rhythm characteristics, the singing skills and the stage performance.

Keywords: Northeast Folk song, Watching the Yangko Dance, Artistic features.

1. Introduction

Northeast folk songs, popular in the provinces of Northeast China and Inner Mongolia, are known for their resonant, high-pitched melodies and enduring charm[1]. "Watching the Yangko Dance" stands out as a representative piece of this genre, adapted from local melodies by Guo Song and accompanied by Li Yong's arrangements[2]. Its tune and lyrics distinctively capture the folk customs of Northeast China, with a strong local flair in both vocal performance and stage interpretation. This work creatively integrates folk singing techniques, elements of Errenzhuan composition, national vocal styles, and oral language expression in Northeast China, representing a perfect blend of creativity, artistry, and cultural essence, offering significant artistic value.

Zhang Yan and Zhang Yongquan discussed the literary and artistic characteristics of "Watching the Yangko Dance" from the perspectives of dialect, long and short sentences and stacked sentences, lining words and lining tune[3]. Ren Yu's study "A Comparative Study of Various Versions of Northeast Folk Song Watching the Yangko Dance" analyzes the singing styles and characteristics of different versions of Guo Song, Fan Shuangyan and male-female antiphonal singing, and focuses on the re-creation of this work [4]. Li Yijie analyzed the language tone and local dialect singing skills of Kan Yangko[5]. Zhuang Jialiang analyzed the singing skills and emotional expression of "Watching the Yangko Dance"[6]. However, the above paper does not involve stage performance. Therefore, this paper uses literature review method and combines my own performance experience to comprehensively and deeply analyze the artistic characteristics and emotional expression of the music from the perspectives of work analysis, singing skills and stage performance.

2. Introduction to the Northeast Folk Song " Watching the Yangko Dance"

2.1. Cultural Background of "Watching the Yangko Dance"

Northeast China is a multi-ethnic region, where people used to make a living by working in the fields, fishing in rivers and hunting in forests [7]. The vast territory, abundant resources and unique folk culture in the northeast region have created people's straightforward and unrestrained, frank and open-minded personality, which has formed the gorgeous, broad and bold characteristics of lyrics and music composition as well as unique and humorous forms of singing and performance. Folk songs in Northeast China are created by impromptu people during their working life [8]. Therefore, the subject matter is mainly about hunting, fishing and labor which can directly reflect the daily life of people in Northeast China. The lyrics of "Watching the Yangko Dance" are direct and humorous, using the common dialect in Northeast China. It combines the elements of local opera Errenzhuan (Errenzhuan

typically involves performances by a male and a female duo. In singing, these performances are often characterized by harmonizing and antiphonal singing, where the performers sing in response to each other) in Northeast China and Yangko, with a performance form of singing while performing and an exaggerated singing style. The song integrates many skills and methods of ethnic performance, and also absorbs the dialects and lining words from Northeast China. It has strong colloquial characteristics, making the song full of vitality and color.

2.2. Introduction to “Watching the Yangko Dance”

The Northeast folk song “Watching the Yangko Dance” is a multi-section song with strong narrative. The story content interprets the simple state of a northeast girl who wants to watch the Yangko dance with her beloved lover from the first person perspective: she dresses up carefully before watching the Yangko dance and is eager to see her lover soon. The lively scenes of lion dance, decorated lanterns and boating during the Yangko Dance, as well as the feeling that a girl looks for her lover in the crowd but is ashamed to say it when she wants to call him, reflect from details the nervousness, excitement and unspeakable emotions of Northeast girls when dating their beloved lovers, and the nervousness, embarrassment and shyness after losing shoes. The lyrics are simple and unpretentious, and the dialogue makes the song more tactful. The sound is engraving and colorful. The song is sung in Northeast dialect, showing the simple and playful personality of Northeast girls.

3. Analysis of “Watching the Yangko Dance”

Originally a folk tune of Northeast China, Yangko Dance is a representative Northeast folk song. It was later adapted by Guo Song, a famous singer and artist in China. This work is closely related to the folk customs and musical style of Northeast China, and incorporates some elements of Northeast Errenzhuang. It is one of the most influential vocal works in Northeast folk songs.

3.1. Musical Form Structure of Watching the Yangko Dance

The Northeast folk song "Watching the Yangko Dance" is a typical C major pentatonic scale. The song consists of four periods. The first period describes the girl dressing up before going out and the lively scene on the street. The second period describes various praises such as playing dragon lantern, twisting Yangko Dance and walking on stilts in the Yangko Festival. The third period depicts the scene of a Northeast girl looking for her lover nervously and excitedly. The fourth period describes the joyful mood of the girl after finding her lover. The song is a repetition of multiple changes in the single form, each expressed by changing the length of the lyrics (see example 1).

Example 1

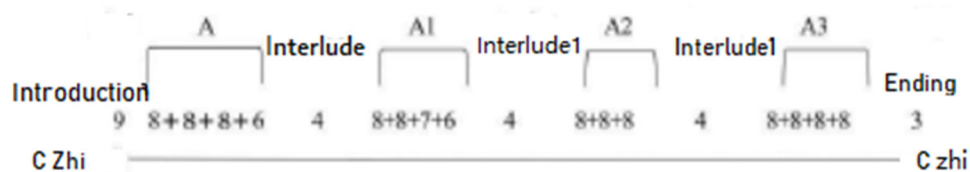


Figure 1. Musical structure

The beginning of the song is the introduction of 9 bars, introduced by C Zhi pentatonic scale, accompanied by dexterous and light music to create a girl's joyful mood before meeting her lover and the lively scene of the Yangko dance, thus leading to the first period of the work. There are 30 bars in the first period, which is divided into four periods. The first two lines of paragraph A tell about the lively scene of the Yangko dance, and the rhythm of the third, fourth and fifth lines gradually becomes compact and clear, illustrating the girl's anxious state as she hurries to dress and put on makeup. In the fifth and sixth lines, "De Er Na Hu Er Ke Hu Er Ke Hu Ya" and the pronunciation of "Mouth says it's Yangko Dance!" and "Hmm" vividly and directly express her nervousness and excitement, which

are obviously different from the music in the first and second lines (Example 2). After that, the last line "Actually a lover..." returns to its original mood and content.



Figure 2. Dialogue

This is followed by a four-bar interlude that leads to the second period: There are 29 bars in this part, which is the variation and repetition of the first period. The structure is exactly the same as that of the second period, but the subtle changes in melody make the second section more interesting, making the work no longer just a single repetition and less boring; The variation of the second interlude is repeated. Thanks to the ornamental notes, it better creates a happy atmosphere before the girl and the lover meet, and also paves the way for the third period: There are 24 bars in the third period, which is divided into three parts. The first eight bars focus on describing the scene, so the rhythm is not very compact but slightly gentle. The following 16 bars describe the scene of a Northeast girl looking for her lover nervously and excitedly, which is in sharp contrast to the first 8 bars. The following interlude is a complete repetition of the second interlude, which leads to the fourth period. The overall rhythm of the fourth period is extremely jumpy, showing the girl's joy after meeting her lover. Finally, there are three bars at the end. The ending is also a change and repetition of interludes. The repeated single sections are memorable.

3.2. Melody Features of Watching the Yangko Dance

The melody of this Northeast folk song is dominated by pentatonic scale. In the gentle melody, there will be sudden jumping and highly dissociative inflections, which are closely related to the tones and expressions of dialects in Northeast China. The Big Leap is quickly advanced to the next syllable, so its melodic lines are natural and everything falls into place from a melodic point of view, as if you can see the edges of character in people's self-talk. This song frequently uses six degrees and seven jumps. The combination of the big jump above seven degrees and the singing style of the Northeast ethnic groups makes this opera have a more unique musical language. The tone of the Northeast dialect is witty and humorous, with exaggerated expression forms. The dexterous changes in melody make the characters more distinctively depicted. In this vocal music work, ornamental sounds are often used to enrich the musical language and emphasize the local characteristics of the Northeast China, making it catchy and uniquely dramatic.

3.3. Rhythm Features of Watching the Yangko Dance

In terms of rhythm, the whole piece adopts a hasty, powerful and flexible dance rhythm, which is mainly 2/4 beat. Generally speaking, the rhythm of this work is very cheerful, and the melodic music is also lively. Unlike traditional strong-weak rules and rhythmic patterns, the accent of this song mostly shifts to the second half of the beat. The "crowd" in "joyfully running through the crowd" uses syncopated rhythmic patterns (Example 3), which are different from normal musical rhythms and can better show the living mood of people in Northeast China. It's got a little playfulness.



Figure 3. The "crowd" uses syncopated rhythmic patterns

4. Singing skills of Watching the Yangko Dance

"Watching the Yangko Dance" has a strong Northeast characteristics, so the use of breath and language features are very important. Only by controlling the use of breath can the emotions and regional charm behind the song be expressed. Combined with the oral expression of Northeast dialect, the application of retroflex-nasal and the addition of lining words, can the singing reflect the straightforward, simple and sincere character of the people in Northeast China.

4.1. Breath Control of "Watching the Yangko Dance"

"Watching the Yangko Dance" features beautiful melody, lively rhythm and deep Northeast flavor. Therefore, when singing this piece, it is essential to articulate the lyrics precisely while also maintaining "the common touch" and the authentic style. Breath control is crucial in this song, focusing on both 'soft' and 'bouncy' breath techniques. The 'soft' breath technique involves maintaining breath support while pushing out from the lower abdomen, as if kneading around a rope [9]. This method of breath control helps sustain even force from the diaphragm and creates a continuous, narrative quality in the voice. For instance, the word 'high' in line "not quite tall enough" should be sung softly; the diaphragm expands rapidly and then contracts, producing a sound that springs forth and rebounds, effectively conveying the straightforward emotions of a Northeast girl.

Next is the use of "bouncy" breath control, which involves making the voice leap along with the lively melody, ensuring it is both penetrating and elastic. This technique allows for perfect integration with the song's rhythm. Coupled with ornamentation, it effectively conveys a spirited and joyful mood. For example, in "Watching the Yangge Dance," the lyrics "De Na Hu Er Ke Hu Er Ke Hu Ya" are not only plentiful and tongue-twisting but also employ a lot of retroflex-nasal, so it's important to control the bouncing of the breath to bring vivacity and flexibility to the performance. This creates a stark contrast with the smooth melody that precedes it, enhancing the overall lively atmosphere of the song. Additionally, mastering large melodic jumps is crucial as they reflect the straightforward character of The Northeast girls. When singing, ensure that the melody and emotions are synchronized during these jumps. Furthermore, certain words, like "wai" (outside) in "gongs and drums resonate inside and outside the village", should be exaggeratedly pronounced to vividly portray the girl's urgent and anxious state of mind as she awaits her lover.

4.2. Features of Singing Language in "Watching the Yangko Dance"

4.2.1. Colloquialization of Northeast Dialect in "Watching the Yangko Dance"

Dialects are linguistic expressions unique to different regions, and when singing local folk songs, it is essential to perform according to the characteristics of the regional dialects [10]. The Northeast dialect, for instance, is a distinctive language of the Northeast China, and in the Northeast folk song "Watching the the Yangko Dance," colloquial dialect is prevalent throughout. For example, the word "liao" corresponds to "quick walking" or "jogging" in Mandarin. The lyrics "joyfully running through the crowd" and "pushing and jostling their way out" use the term "liao(out)" along with "pushing and jostling" to describe the girl's urgency to meet her lover, adding a humorous touch. Therefore, the performance should emphasize the girl's eagerness to see her lover.

In this piece, some pronunciations differ from Standard Mandarin, reflecting the unique colloquial dialect of the Northeast China. For example, "the lion over there still shakes off its fur", the word "Na(there)" should not be pronounced as "na" but rather as "nei." This adjustment is typical of the Northeast dialectic intonation and should be deliberately altered when sung. Similarly, the word "ge(put)" in "where to put the little face" is pronounced as "ge" in Standard Mandarin, but according to Northeast dialect characteristics, it should be pronounced as "gao." Such regional dialect adaptations not only better highlight the emotional depth behind the song's characters but also quickly resonate with the audience.

4.2.2. The Skillful Use of Retroflex-nasal in “Watching the Yangko Dance”

The use of the retroflex-nasal is a common characteristic of Northeast folk songs [11]. For example, in this piece, lyrics such as "guāzǐr liǎn" (heart-shaped face) enhance the structural integrity of the song and more vividly convey the lyrical content. Words like "bàn" (companion), "liǎndàn" (cheek), and "tuán" (group) are explicitly marked with the "er" suffix in the standard lyrics. Additionally, in this song, some lyrics do not have the "er" marked, but are sung with the erhua. For instance, the "yuè" in "zhēng yuè lǐ lái," the "nián" in "xīnnián," the "tiān" in "luógǔ xuān tiān," the "rén" in "xiǎo jiārén," the "biān" in "diǎn chúnbiān," the "shān" in "xiǎo huāshān," the "máo" in "dǒulǒu máo," the "rén" in "pà biérén," and the "jiǎo" in "qiàozhe jiǎo" are examples. These uses of retroflex-nasal lend a playful and charming tone to the song "Watching the Yangko Dance" highlighting its humorous nature.

4.2.3. Use of Lining Words in "Watching the Yangko Dance"

Lining words in song lyrics are additional words, phrases, or sentences interspersed throughout the lyrics to enhance the song's structure [12]. For example, in "Watching the Yangko Dance," line “In the first lunar month, right? New Year's Day”) includes "ba" as lining words. These types of words generally serve to supplement the lyrical sentences. The entire line "De Na Hu Er Ke Hu Er Ke Hu Ya" acts as lining words. Although it is not the main content of the lyrics, it enriches the lyrical framework and bolsters the structure of the musical segment. It ensures that transitions in spoken parts do not feel disjointed and provides emotional continuity in the lyrics, expressing joy and excitement vividly while also portraying the character's emotions at the moment

5. Performance Analysis of “Watching the Yangko Dance”

The work "Watching the Yangko Dance" is based on the lively scene of watching Yangko Dance in Northeast China at that time. A northeast girl is looking forward to seeing her lover. Based on the study of Stanislavsky's acting system, this paper analyzes the performance from the elements of "voice", "speech", "movement" and "acting". The Stanislavski System, developed by the Soviet theatre practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski, is a comprehensive acting theory system. Adhering to principles of realism, it emphasizes the importance of experiencing and recreating life in performance. Discussions on "voice, speech, and movement" can be found in the latter part of Stanislavski's Building a Character. The exploration of "acting" is detailed in the earlier part of his work, An Actor Prepares.

5.1. "Voice" in “Watchig the Yangko Dance”

Northeast folk songs are shaped by a unique regional cultural background, engaging folk customs, and a distinctive linguistic environment, which collectively foster the straightforward and lively character of the Northeast people. This cultural mix, combined with scientific vocal techniques, has led to a singing style in Northeast folk music where more chest voice is used in the mid-voice range. In this way, when transitioning between the middle and high registers, attention should be paid to the seamless shifting between chest voice and head voice. This approach helps maintain the authentic flavor of Northeast folk songs, ensuring a sincere, simple, and comfortably natural listening experience. Therefore, the use of breath during these transitions is crucial. For instance, in lines "gongs and drums resonate inside and outside the village" and "joyfully running through the crowd", the words "wai" (outside) and "di" (ground) should be sung differently from the others. The entire line should maintain consistent breath support, but these words need to be emphasized more strongly to convey the lively and playful nature of Northeast folk songs and the bold, spirited character of Northeast women.

The Northeast folk song "Watching the Yangko Dance" should capture the straightforward, sincere, yet shy nature of Northeast women in its tone. The singing should be light, nimble, and emotionally charged, producing a sound that is both loud and crisp without losing its sweetness. Vocal adjustments should be made according to the lyrics to match the shifts in emotion. For instance, the line "Why

hasn't my relentless lover arrived yet?" conveys a sense of urgency, reproach, and bashfulness, almost as if we can see the girl biting her lip, clutching her clothes, stamping her foot, blushing, and reluctantly looking into the distance. This is a stark contrast to the earlier lively and joyous mood of "gongs and drums resonate inside and outside the village)." Throughout the song, it's important to maintain a natural lift in the facial muscles for a smiling expression, and the vocal placement should be forward-focused.

Attention should also be given to ornamentations that are characteristic of ethnic music, such as appoggiaturas and glissandos. For instance, in "shi xing tou(popular hairstyles)" careful attention must be paid to the use of appoggiaturas. Singers need to deeply understand the linguistic features of Northeast China and comprehend the meanings of the lyrics to accurately determine which notes require standard pronunciation and which allow for creative interpretation. The use of glissandos helps to craft an image of Northeast women as cheerful and exuberantly warm, achieving an effect akin to hitting the exact notes. Therefore, singers need to manage both ascending and descending glissandos and use head resonance to showcase the rich Northeast flavor of the song.

5.2. "Speech" in 'Watching the Yangko Dance'

Northeast China, known for its unique cultural, folk, and environmental attributes, tends to foster a straightforward and blunt communication style, coupled with a distinct local dialect. To master the folk songs of a region, it's essential to understand the linguistic nuances of that area. In Northeast China, the vocal technique is often described as "loud and clear," featuring a robust and straightforward enunciation. This style includes significant oral and chest resonance, making it crucial to pay attention to the articulation during singing. For instance, in line "barefoot is so hard to win", the word "duo" (more), a degree adverb, is emphatically pronounced in Northeast dialect and is intoned with a rising tone rather than the flat tone used elsewhere. Such nuances must be carefully handled in performance.

The tone and intonation of Northeast folk songs are quite distinctive. In "Watching the Yangko Dance," there are several instances where the tone conveys specific emotions, such as surprise, which is expressed with a sudden "yo he". When depicting being stepped on unexpectedly, the line "yo yo" is used. In the line "joyfully running through the crowd", the word "di" (ground) is emphasized and pronounced with retroflex-nasalto capture the girl's exuberant and jubilant spirit. This use of tone and special pronunciation highlights the emotional undertones and cultural nuances of the song.

5.3. "Movement" in "Watching the Yangko Dance"

When performing "Watching the Yangko Dance" on stage, it is essential to exhibit a vibrant energy, good posture, and a compelling presence. Additionally, the incorporation of elements from Errenzhuan and large-scale Yangko Dance into gestures and eye movements is crucial. These elements should blend seamlessly and complement one another. For example, in the "Counting popular hairstyles wearing, a golden chain, with a heart-shaped facee, like a powdered ball, with bright rouge by the lips, dressed in a little floral shirt", one can draw from the theatrical elements of Errenzhuan and traditional opera, supported by indicative gestures. Regarding eye movement, different lyrical content should dictate specific expressions. For instance, a fixed gaze can be paired with body movements, directing the eyes in line with the body and fingers. The "heart-shaped face" lyric might call for a shy glance, eyes slightly lowered, and avoiding eye contact. In "running through the crowd," the gaze should be directed distantly, with the eyes reflecting the scene and shining. For "playing with the dragon lantern, the early boat, twisting in the Yangko Dance, walking on stilts...", the gaze should shift flexibly between these four directions—left, right, far, and near. Emotional expressions through the eyes are vital, such as joy in "joyfully running through the crowd", surprise in "the lion over there still shakes off its fur, anxiety in "why hasn't my relentless lover arrived yet?", and shyness in "wanting to call him but fearing others might hear".

5.4. "Acting" of "Watching the Yangko Dance"

Imagination, understanding, passion, and adaptability are essential. In handling the Northeast folk song "Watching the Yangko Dance," it is crucial that the lyrics evoke imagery and the accompaniment stirs emotions. From the beginning of the music, performers must immerse themselves in the emotion and role, embodying the Northeast girl described in the lyrics. They should conjure up vibrant scenes of households bustling with New Year celebrations, depict the excitement and flurry of getting dressed up, and the anticipation of meeting their beloved. Through vivid and dynamic stage performances, the singer must bring the piece to life, showcasing the various emotional states of joy, excitement, and nervousness.

6. Conclusion

In the Northeast folk song "Watching the Yangko Dance," the lyrics are straightforward and lively, the melody is catchy, and the imagery is vivid, with a strong regional flavor. This paper provides a detailed analysis of the song's structural form, lyrical characteristics, singing techniques, and stage performance. When performing this piece, it is essential to thoroughly understand the cultural context. Unique vocal techniques, precise breath control, mastery of the retroflex-nasal, and dynamic stage performances are crucial for bringing the song to life. Singers must accurately manage the relationship between voice and emotion. After a deep analysis of the song's structural features and performance style, a secondary creative process should be undertaken. This involves integrating physical movements and facial expressions to accurately reflect the musical style and the imagery of the music.

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